

At the beginning of my report for last year, I stated that the weather conditions were the worst that I could remember. Well, this last session supports the theory that our winters are getting cloudier and wetter. Out of a possible 98 viewing sessions between mid September and mid April, the Observatory was opened on only 46 evenings and only 23 of those could be described as really 'clear'. The fact that the Observatory was closed for 50% of the time, resulted in great frustration for the public, who seldom failed to communicate this to me, taking full advantage of 'new technology' in the form of mobile telephones!

However, on those occasions when observations were possible, attendance at the Observatory was quite high. Some 595 members of the public attended, compared to 582 last year. Despite the similar level of attendance, donations via the fund box were considerably higher this year, totalling some £229, compared to £175 last year. Does this I wonder, indicate a greater level of enthusiasm for astronomy, or is it merely a reflection of a greater level of affluence in the present economic climate? Our new status as a European facility was confirmed by one donation in the form of a five Euro note! I am undecided whether to frame it, bank it or burn it!

Before the session began Simon Lang and I re-covered the western side of the annexe roof, which had been leaking. It was unfortunate that we chose what was probably the hottest day in the summer to do it! Crawling about on hot mineral felt and plastering tarry sealant in temperatures of 90 degrees F with no shade is an experience not to be recommended!

At the beginning of the session, both Jupiter and Saturn were again well placed for observation. There was considerable activity on Jupiter with a large white oval in the South Temperate Belt which interacted with the Great Red Spot and pale 'barges' forming in the belt following the GRS. There were also a number of interesting shadow transits a couple of which I managed to image digitally. In addition this session featured two occultations of Jupiter, one on 26th of January and the second on 23rd of February. I managed to record the disappearance on the 26th of Jan. but it clouded up before reappearance. Needless to say it was totally cloudy for the 23rd of February event!

Saturn was well seen with the ring system almost fully open and Saturn itself was occulted on April 16th but again unseen here due to cloud cover.

Several comets were in evidence during the session. The first and brightest was comet Ikeya-Zhang,

seen low down in the west after sunset in late March. Ikeya-Zhang moved up passing beta Andromedae on March 30th and thence higher passing M31 on April 4th. At its brightest, at about mag +3.3, it was difficult for the naked eye, being low in the murk of the horizon; but it was well seen in binoculars exhibiting a strongly condensed nucleus and a thin tail extending for about 1.5 degrees. The comet moved further north, passing 2 degrees north of M13 on May 16th, by which time it had faded to around 8th magnitude.

Other comets included- C/2002 E2 Snyder-Murakami, WM1 LINEAR, OG108 LONEOS and C/2002 F1 Utsunomiya, all of which were fairly faint. Comet LONEOS passed close to the Pole Star between April 8th and 9th, but at mag. 9.2, I could not identify it with binoculars.

On January 7th, the Earth missed a collision with a 300 metre dia. asteroid by a mere 830,000 kilometres. The asteroid, 2001YB5, was discovered by the Near Earth Asteroid Tracking (NEAT) telescope and could pose a threat in the future. It orbits the Sun every 1,320 days; but of greater concern is asteroid 1999AN10 which will approach Earth by a mere 37,000 km on Aug. 7th 2027!

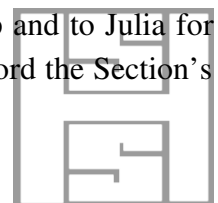
In March the Society put on a series of special lectures and demonstrations to coincide with Science Week. During this week, the Observatory was to be opened on a nightly basis. However, once again bad weather seriously curtailed our activities, only two nights out of ten were clear enough for demonstrations.

At the very end of the session observers were treated to a rare planetary alignment, when all the major naked eye planets - Mercury, Venus, Mars, Saturn and Jupiter, were gathered together in the western sky just after sunset.

Once again, the Society was invited to open the Observatory on two evenings in May to coincide with the Hampstead and Highgate Festival. Both sessions were fully booked for around 25 visitors. The first evening was dull and overcast and a thunder storm began before the allotted hour was up. The second evening featured persistent rain! Notwithstanding the appalling weather conditions, and being forced to listen to yours truly talking for an hour on both evenings, the visitors expressed delight at the experience and the organisers have asked for a repeat performance next year!

All in all a session with much of interest which was unfortunately marred by poor weather.

As usual, I wish to thank all demonstrators and assistants for their continued help and to Julia for preparing the roster and looking after the accounts. I should also like to put on record the Section's



thanks to Geoff Epps who resigned at the end of the session. Geoff. has been a demonstrator for over 30 years and took care of the Sunday morning sessions despite living in Kent!

Doug Daniels (Astro. Sec.)

